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LONDON FOR GOLDRICH

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SUBJECT: MEDIA REACTION ON MIDDLE EAST

Summary

-- Lead stories in all papers today, December 29, focus on developments in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and continued violence in Iraq. Reports on the aftermath of the "apocalyptic" earthquake in Asia dominate international news pages in all papers.

Editorial Commentary

-- "Al-Hurra is not free [hurra]"

Columnist Yaqoub Jaber writes on the op-ed page of center-left, influential Arabic daily Al-Dustour (12/29): "In vain, the United States tried to win the hearts of Arabs and Muslims in favor of its clumsy policies in the Middle East. The United States resorted to methods that can in the least be described as naive and silly. It does so seemingly unaware that what is hurting its image most in the Arab region is the Palestinian and Iraqi blood on its hands, its insistence on supporting Sharon in his bloody crimes in the Palestinian Territories, and its continuing occupation of Iraq and the slaughter of its people in cold blood and on a daily basis.. In its attempts to change its ugly image in the Arab world, the United States launched a satellite television channel and called it, falsely, Al-Hurra [the free], thinking that this channel would bring the Arabs around with regard to American policy.. One of the programs broadcast by Al-Hurra is called 'Sa'ah Hurra' [free hour] that hosts various groups of begrudging writers and analysts and, for the sake of camouflage, inserts an Arab personality known for opposition to U.S. policies. It happened that I watched an episode of this program on the Syrian role in Lebanon. I noticed that the host was giving ample time for the guests opposed to Syrian policy, while the guest who opposes U.S. policy was cut off as soon as he began to speak, particularly when addressing a sensitive issue likely to expose the fragility of U.S. policy or the grave mistakes made under false slogans in Iraq and Palestine."

-- "The London conference and a little bit of required hope"

Daily columnist Urayb Rintawi writes on the op-ed page of center-left, influential Arabic daily Al-Dustour (12/29): "Like other political initiatives that broke on the rock of Israeli intransigence and U.S. bias, the image of the initiative launched lately by the British Prime Minister dwindles.. from being an international conference for peace in the Middle East, Blair's initiative turned into a conference to discuss the Palestinian Authority's reform and restructuring. From being a conference designed to pave the way for resuming the negotiations to salvage Bush's vision and the roadmap, it turned into a conference from which Israeli will be absent so that it would not give the impression that the negotiations have started. The result is that Blair's idea for an international conference has been enfeebled and so did his 'historic' mission in the region. He became like any other international envoy, coming and going and carrying the very same merchandise. Blair's mission may conclude next March with an eased feeling of guilt towards the Palestinians, but it will fail to encourage Arab and Palestinian belief that regaining stolen rights is imminent or that peace is at hand."

-- "The American peace delegation"

Columnist Haidar Rashid writes on the op-ed page of independent, mass-appeal Arabic daily Al-Arab Al-Yawm (12/29): "The number of the American delegation from the 'families for peace' organization is not large compared to the millions of the American people, but this limited number constitutes an important and serious case: five of its fourteen members had lost

sons in Iraq. The humble amount brought by the delegation in the form of humanitarian equipment does not exceed 600,000 dollars, which does not even come close to the billions being spent by the United States on the war or that will be stolen from Iraq as a result of the occupation. Yet, this amount constitutes a significant case in relation to what is going on in Iraq, to the U.S. administration and the American people's position towards it and its role in Iraq. The small American delegation holds U.S. President Bush and Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld responsible for the death of the American soldiers in Iraq. This is the most significant indication of the delegation's visit.. The American peace delegation is a phenomenon not to be belittled or doubted. It reflects a genuine tendency among the American people that has not materialized yet in the form of pressure that would lead to America's withdrawal from Iraq. The American dead in Iraq will be one of the most important factors leading to the materialization of such a pressuring position."

HALE